

KAVA

Scientific Name: Piper methysticum

Common Names: Kava, Kava Kava, Kava pepper, Ava, Ava pepper, Awa, Kava root, Kawa, Kawa-Kawa, Kew, Rauschpfeffer, Sakau, Tonga, Wurzelstock, and Yangona.

Historical Perspective: A non-alcoholic drink made from the root of kava played an important role in a variety of ceremonies in the Pacific Islands. The drink was used in welcoming visiting royalty, at meetings of village elders, or as part of social gatherings. Pacific Islanders valued kava for its mellowing effects, and to encourage socializing. It was also noted for initiating a state of contentment, a greater sense of well-being, treatment of asthma, and enhanced mental acuity, memory, and sensory perception. Kava has also been used traditionally to treat pain.

Common Uses: Relief of nervous anxiety, stress, restlessness, insomnia, and menopausal symptoms.

Investigational Uses: A possible alternative to synthetic anxiolytics (to reduce anxiety), tricyclic antidepressants (to improve the mood of a depressed patient) and benzodiazepines (minor tranquilizer to cause relaxation and sedation).

Forms Used: Capsule, pill, tincture, or tea.

Common and/or Recommended Dosage: 140-210 mg kava lactones (condensed liquid made from lactic acid) per day

Potential Side Effects: Scaly yellowing of the skin; yellowing of nails, eyes and hair; eye irritation; tiredness and tendency to sleep; impairment of motor reflexes, equilibrium, and judgment; rash; gastrointestinal problems; pupil dilation; tiredness in the morning, and liver disease; including hepatitis, cirrhosis, and liver failure.

Food/Drug Interactions: Alcohol

Contraindication to Use: Not recommended for those with liver disease or depression. Also not recommended for anyone taking drug products that can affect the liver, barbiturates, or psychopharmacological substances longer than three months. It is not recommended during pregnancy and lactation, or for children.

Research Data on Safety and Efficacy:

- 1) Tests on animals show that extracts of the drug-but no single identified compound-cause muscle relaxation to the point that animals fall out of revolving cages.
- 2) Medical tests suggest it may be helpful in treating psychosomatic symptoms in menopause.
- 3) Clinical studies have shown effective results on subjects with moderate to severe anxiety, without the addictive side effects of Valium and other prescription anti-anxiety drugs.
- 4) Kava abuse by those who take it daily to the point of intoxication may lose weight, develop a distinctive scaly rash, and have lower counts of albumin (major blood plasma protein), protein, bilirubin (bile pigment that circulates in the plasma), platelets (blood clotting factor), and lymphocytes (white blood cells that play a role in the immune system) in the blood.
- 5) If planning to use for more than 3 months, consult a physician.
- 6) On February 22, 1998, the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) announced 16 dietary supplements as risky. Kava was listed with a warning that it "can potentiate the effects of alcohol and certain psychological drugs."
- 7) On March 25, 2002 the FDA issued a consumer advisory advising of the "potential risk of severe liver injury associated with the use of kava-containing dietary supplements."

Bottom-Line: Not recommended due to the potential risk of severe liver injury.

References:

Graedon, J and Graedon, T. The people's pharmacy guide to home and herbal remedies. Graedon Enterprises, Inc; 1999.

Miller, L and Wallace, M. Herbal medicinals: A clinician's guide. Hawthorne Press, New York; 1998.

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